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In Glendale, some find outdoor smoking ban a drag

Restricting cigarettes in public spaces such as parks and dining areas threatens a social norm within the Armenian community.

June 23, 2009 | Corina Knoll

They've been coming to Urartu Coffee for months, and every day it's the same. They sit. They sip. They smoke.

It's hard to explain, the men say -- there's just something about the taste of tar joining java.

But Jack Kakoyan, 28, and his friends may soon stop meeting at their usual table, where they spend hours socializing in the sun. Because while the tiny Glendale cafe serves up a great cup of Armenian coffee, a viscous version of espresso, the city has adopted anti-smoking ordinances that make their daily ritual illegal.

Now the suburb of 200,000 is in the midst of educating the public about its prohibition on smoking in outdoor public areas, including parks, parking structures and dining areas.

The no-smoking ban isn't expected to be a major problem at some Glendale attractions such as the Americana at Brand, a glitzy open-air shopping area with luxury condos that has been smoke-free since it opened a year ago. But for smaller cafes and eateries that cater to the city's large Armenian population, the law is nothing less than a major cultural shift.

The Armenian community has made its mark on Glendale, making up about a third of the city's residents. But in Armenian society, smoking after a meal or with coffee is a habit that the city might find hard to break. This is especially true for newer immigrants.

"About 90% of Armenians smoke," Kakoyan said, offering a decidedly unscientific statistic as he and four friends sat at Urartu's outdoor tables, each with a cigarette in hand. "Most of the people here want to smoke with their coffee. I totally understand why you don't smoke inside -- it will bother someone you're next to. But we're outside."

Gearing up for their night jobs as limo drivers and cabbies, the men downed cups of joe and inhaled long drags from their brand of choice, paying no attention to the city-issued decal affixed to the cafe door that bore the universal sign for no smoking.

Inside, owner Urik Ghazalian, 46, shrugged at his customers' disobedience. "People have been smoking for hundreds of years," he said. "You can't stop it. I tell people it's not a smoking area. Sometimes they hide it or say they'll pay the ticket."

Business owners have the option of sanctioning an outdoor smoking area, but it must be 10 feet away from non-smokers. Ghazalian's storefront isn't big enough to accommodate both, and he's lost some regulars. He's in favor of people's health, he said, but he wishes City Council members had thought about those already struggling with an economy in dire straits.

Although many continue to violate the law, Glendale has issued only about 10 tickets, focusing first on spreading the word.

A marketing campaign that includes brochures, signage, public service announcements and advertisements shown with previews at movie theaters kicked off in February.

"Rather than just go out there and unilaterally issue citations, let's warn people and hope that people change voluntarily," explained Sam Engel, the city's neighborhood services administrator. "That's worked to a large degree. The community is noticeably more smoke-free than it was six months ago."

Engel said that although Glendale does have a large Armenian population, the percentage of residents who smoke in the city is just 2% higher than the county average, according to L.A. County's Department of Public Health. But that's not taking into account underage smokers, as well as frequent visitors.

"We also have a large Korean community and our understanding is the Korean community also has a higher average percentage" of smokers, Engel said. "This is not unusual with any city that has a first-generation immigrant population coming from countries where smoking was more socially acceptable."

The City Council will meet in August to determine when education will phase into full enforcement. Until then, the city's fresh-air ambassador, Armine Jimenez, will continue to canvass streets and conduct presentations around town.

"Most of the people are very considerate and they want to comply," she said. "It's the 20% that are upset because they're creatures of habit."

Jimenez said she's received dozens of calls praising the city's stance on secondhand smoke. Some, like resident Jenny Cleveland, would even like the restrictions extended to condominiums. The 33-year-old owner of a tutoring company worked long hours to save up for her one-bedroom condo. But Cleveland's home has not been the haven she envisioned after a smoker moved into the downstairs unit.

"He stands on the balcony and smokes," she said. "I have a sliding glass door so it just comes directly into my bedroom." Cleveland said the result has been a persistent cough, itchy eyes and the smell of smoke in her bedsheets.

But smokers argue that they have already ceded indoor spaces to non-smokers so outdoor areas should be fair game.

"Outside, the smoke disappears in a second," said Leo Asatryan, manager of a new fusion restaurant that will soon open on Chevy Chase Drive. "Cars pollute. Are we going to ban cars?"

Asatryan, 23, added that although he doesn't smoke, he wouldn't want smoking customers to feel unwelcome -- though he admitted he's not terribly worried.

"Honestly, I don't think anybody's going to follow it," he said.

Some Armenian-owned businesses, however, have embraced the ordinance. Raffi's Place, known for its spicy beef kebab plate, is entirely smoke-free, even though the main dining room is outside and could have accommodated a smoking section.

"We decided it was the right thing to do," said manager Armond Bakjianian, 30. "Even people who smoke don't like smoke in their face while they're eating."

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